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CHINATOWN

BOSTON 200

NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY SERIES





HENRY ADAMS, the nineteenth century philosopher, said that the history of America is not the history of the few, but the history of the many. The people of Boston's neighborhoods have accepted the challenge of Adam's statement to produce "people's histories" of their own communities. Hundreds of Bostonians formed committees in each of fifteen neighborhoods of the city, volunteering their time over the past year and a half to research in libraries, search for photographs, produce questionnaires, transcribe tapes, assist in writing and editing, and most important, act as interviewers and subjects of "oral history" research. These booklets are not traditional textbook histories, and we have not attempted to cull a statistical sample. We have simply talked with our neighbors, people who remember, sometimes with fondness, sometimes with regret, but always with wisdom. For each of us has his or her own story to tell, and these stories are vital to the development of our neighborhoods and our city.

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Boston 200 is the city's official program to observe the Bicentennial of the American Revolution from April 1975 through December 1976.

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ALMOST a century ago, Boston's first Chinese pitched their tents along tiny, crowded Ping On Alley. They came from the West Coast as contract laborers, recruited for the construction of the Pearl Street telephone exchange.

From its makeshift beginnings, the "tent city" evolved into a tightly knit, tenacious community, and today, the narrow alley off Beech Street is at the center of what has become the fourth largest Chinese community in the United States. Immigration restrictions long stunted the community's growth; discrimination has confined Chinese workers to low-paying jobs; and the cultural barrier has prolonged the existence of an insular, immigrant community. Chinatown has always been a cohesive community and even now perhaps as many as 80 percent of its residents neither speak nor understand English.

While the Chinese number among the residents of nearly every Boston neighborhood today, Chinatown remains a focal point for them, a thriving business and social center that serves more than just its nearby residents. With its restaurants, grocery stores, and gift shops, the Beech Street area has become a source of food, culture, and friendship for its residents and

those who live elsewhere in the city, as well as for the Chinese throughout New England.

Recognizable by its pagoda-topped telephone booths and Chinese language signs, the community occupies a low-rent district bounded by expressways on the east and the strip joints of the Combat Zone on the west. Adjacent to the city's central business district and at the heart of its garment district, Chinatown's small area has frequently been the object of competition for its prime space. In recent years, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the Tufts-New England Medical Center, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, and the Department of Public Works have been among the forces vying for the valuable space. Land takings have reduced the area by at least half within the past 15 years, while its population has increased more than 25 percent. Recently through the efforts of community leaders, a growing cultural awareness among the young and among many successful Chinese businessmen and professionals has led to a renewed interest and a greater commitment to resolving Chinatown's problems.

Bounded today by Essex Street to the north, the Massachusetts Turnpike to the south, the Southeast

Expressway to the east, and Harrison Avenue to the west, Chinatown was, until the late 1830s, little more than an ocean tidal flat. The present land area of Chinatown was created, for the most part, by landfill more than 30 years before the Chinese first settled in Boston. The area was intended for residential use, but the railroad tracks blocked expansion to both the east and south, sharply reducing its desirability. By 1843, middle-class Americans were leaving the area and its transformation into a low-rent district, accessible to immigrants, was set.

Boston's introduction to the Chinese came soon after the American Revolution, when the Boston China Trade brought sailors and merchants to the port.

Caroline Chang, a young Chinatown native who works for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, tells of Boston's earliest Chinese visitors:

"Chinese people started coming to the Boston area quite early, even as early as the whaling days. New England merchant ships were going to China and they took on some Chinese as sailors or as crewmen. There are records of Chinese in the area in the 18th century. And there is one Chinese who supposedly is buried at the Central Burying Ground at Boston Common, and that's from those merchant days or whaling days."

In 1786 Major Samuel Shaw, a Boston merchant, was appointed first Consul General to China, and the importance of Boston's trade relations with China was affirmed.

But it was not until almost a century after the opening of the China Trade that Chinese immigrants established a permanent community in Boston. During the 1850s and '60s many Chinese, most of them from the province of Kwang Tung, came to the West Coast. American businessmen recruited them as a cheap source of labor to build western cities, communications systems, and especially the transcontinental railroad. By 1869, when workmen laid the last rail of the roadbed, there were nearly 63,000 Chinese in the western United States. During the 1870s anti-Chinese sentiment mounted steadily among other immigrant groups, because they saw the Chinese as competitors for scarce jobs.

Harry Dow, a respected member of Boston's Chinese community, explains the predicament of Chinese workers in the 1870s:

"The Chinese were brought over here as a form of slavery. They had them build the railroads and do all the heavy work. Of course, they paid them, but after they had finished the heavy work they had no use for them. Then there were the Chinese massacres and

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that sort of thing. Actually the Chinese have had it as hard as the blacks in the United States—they've really gone through the same phase."

Jobless Chinese began to drift to the big cities of the East Coast, where employment opportunities were better and attitudes more cosmopolitan. In 1875, this eastward migration led some of these Chinese workers to Boston. That year, a group of Chinese were brought from the West Coast to break a strike at a shoe factory in North Adams, a small milltown in the Berkshires. When the strike ended, the workers drifted to Boston in search of jobs.

As Ms. Chang tells the story:

"Chinatown started almost 100 years ago. The story is that a group of Chinese were brought in to break the shoe strike. There were the Chinese who had settled on the West Coast, and who had stayed in California after the gold rush, trying to survive. They were laborers—second generation, some still first generation—who had come for about five years and didn't have any

other place to go and couldn't go back to China. They were a ready labor force when workers in this area went on strike."

After 1875, a small but steady stream of immigrants added to Boston's Chinese community. They came on the transcontinental railroad—the product itself of Chinese labor. Boston's Chinese arrived at South Station and settled close by, in the area known as South Cove. Like most immigrant groups they lived in a low-rent section on the edge of the downtown business district.

By 1890, the whole South Cove was clearly established as Chinese. As the tenements grew shabbier and

industry moved closer, previous immigrant groups—the Irish, the Central European Jews, the Italians and then the Syrians—moved out. Of an estimated 250 Chinese in Boston in 1890, at least 200 lived in Chinatown.

Chinatown's population increased slowly, however, because the Chinese were legally affected by a growing anti-foreign sentiment. The community grew to only 1000 people by 1920, and to just 1600 in 1950. The Chinese became the object of the most severe form of restriction; the Exclusion Act of 1883, which for 60 years barred all Chinese from entering the country, except for the wives and children of the

laborers who were already settled here. Later, the Immigration Act of 1924 flatly denied citizenship to all "alien Orientals."

The sojourners who left China were, by and large, poor villagers who intended to send money to their families and save enough so that they might return some day and invest in land or a business.

As Ms. Chang says:

"For a long time, most of the Chinese that came to this country were people from a rural background; they tended to have some education but not a whole lot. It was a predominantly male group that came. Originally the men came because of a drought and a rather unstable political situation in China. And these men just never got a chance to go back. The theory was they would come here, try to earn some money and go back. There was never the intention to stay here."

Before World War II, due to these restrictions, there were very few Chinese families living in Chinatown and rarely any Chinese women. The Chinese tried to circumvent the regulations, often by creating "paper families."

Chinese men who had immigrated here for construction jobs would return to visit China, and, while there, claim the "birth" of sons (sons were deemed more valuable than daughters). An entire "paper family" would be created as Chinese men claimed as wives and children people who were not even related to them. Someone here bought immigration rights for the "family member," most often a son, and then applied to the American Consulate in China for the child's entry to Boston. Once approved, the immigrant received the travel documents necessary to enter the United States.

The most difficult test came upon arrival, during a period of detention in an Immigration and Naturalization Center. The New England Detention Center in East Boston, which was little more than a jail, had

been established specifically for Chinese immigrants and criminals awaiting deportation. The waiting period ranged from a week to over a year. The immigrant "son" and "father" were each subjected to intensive interrogation, and discrepancies in their answers usually meant deportation. If cleared, the recent immigrant could remain here and perhaps travel to China himself some day to devise his own paper family.

Until the 1960s, then, Boston's Chinese-American community was relatively small and predominantly male; family life was almost non-existent; and, since there were few children to send to schools where they would learn English, acculturation to American society was minimal.

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Because the majority of Chinese were alone and without families, the immigrants did not assimilate into American society. Racial discrimination and the language barrier encouraged them to cluster together; restricted housing and employment opportunities limited their mobility. They sought inconspicuousness and chose occupations that minimized economic competition with other groups, and they clung fast to the values of rural China, which further isolated the community. As Charles Sullivan and Kathryn Hatch explained in *The Chinese in Boston, 1970*, "In that [China's] crowded and competitive agricultural society, survival depended on family unity; the stability of the social structure depended . . . on the individual fulfilling his responsibility to the group. . . . In every respect, the individual was expected to defer to the wisdom and privileges of his elders." This ethic, which was based on Confucianism, was autocratic and hierarchical and valued obedience above all else.

Harry Dow describes how this attitude has affected many Chinese immigrants:

"Chinese are more or less fatalistic and believe that what occurs will occur as God ordained. If it was going to happen, it was going to happen, however you lived your life. And I kind of felt that way too. We could go

through life being frugal and saving money and preparing for old age and retirement and all of a sudden—inflation. It changes everything. For instance, I know people that were millionaires in China, everything was wiped out; they came over here and washed dishes. And people that were professional people, fine surgeons in China, come over here now and cannot practice. They have to take menial jobs. So, you have to be fatalistic in a way and say, 'What will be, will be.'"

Few occupations have been open to Chinese-Americans and only rarely did immigrants find work outside of Chinatown. Willing to work long, hard hours, many opened laundries which required little capital and only a slight knowledge of English. The laundries created hundreds of jobs. All the work—washing, ironing, folding, and wrapping—was done by hand. The workday started at 5 a.m. and ended at 11 p.m., with 15 minute breaks for lunch and dinner, and another 15 minutes for resting. Even when machines were

introduced in the late 1930s, the hours remained long and tedious. However, the use of machinery freed workers on Sundays and many people began attending churches where they could learn English. The rest of the day they spent in Chinatown, socializing, grocery-shopping, gambling, and eating with friends and relatives.

Chinese restaurants were the other major source of employment for the community and many immigrants with little knowledge of English found jobs there. Grocery stores and trading companies serving the community spawned employment as well. During the 1920s, Chinese women succeeded other immigrant women in the garment and needle trades.

New communal institutions replaced the social hierarchy left behind in China. Family associations all but governed the community. The associations provided capital to start businesses, found jobs for the unemployed, and mediated family feuds; they also held Sunday social functions. Members bore the same surname but were not necessarily related. Since Chinatown was virtually self-contained socially and economically, these associations wielded considerable power. In each Chinatown, the largest family was most influential and, to compensate, members of several smaller families often grouped together into one association, tracing their kinship through history or literature. For years, the "supreme organization" in New England was the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA); an umbrella for most community groups, it commanded the unquestioned respect of the community. It was founded in 1875 to preserve ties between immigrants and Chinese back home, promote friendly relations between the Chinese and the Americans, and organize welfare and charitable projects. It has traditionally served as the spokesman for the Chinese community and mediated problems among the many community groups.

One such group, the Chinese Merchants Association, tried to assure each of its members a reasonable livelihood by limiting competition among Chinese businesses both in and outside of Chinatown. A typical rule prohibited two Chinese merchants from opening the same kind of business on one street unless a specified number of doors separated them.

The Chinese Merchants Association supported a Chinese school in Boston, the Quong Kow School, established shortly after the turn of the century to provide youths with a traditional Chinese education and strengthen cultural ties. The community solicited scholars from China and others able to teach Chinese, and held classes daily from 4 to 6 p.m. and on Saturday mornings. The school provided the equivalent of an eighth grade education in China.

Finally, there was Chinatown's remittance agent, a one-man multi-service agency. Through him, people made arrangements to send money to relatives still living in China. The agent transferred the money to another agent in the home village and relatives there received the equivalent exchange. In addition, the agent spoke English and took care of interpretation problems, immigration and naturalization matters, income tax forms, and other situations that required familiarity with American society.

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The Second World War was a major turning point in the evolution of the Chinese community in America. The exclusionary laws were repealed in 1943 and other, less restrictive legislation followed. A national origins system was established which allowed 105 immigrants annually, plus immediate relatives of those who had become American citizens. At the outbreak of the war, many stranded Chinese Merchant Marines had volunteered for dangerous naval munitions runs to England. In the next few years, a large number of immigrant Chinese men enlisted or were drafted into the Armed Forces. After the war, Congress granted legal residence status to these men and exempted their wives and children still in China from immigration

quotas. The War Brides Act enabled more Chinese women to come to Boston and, along with other changes in the immigration laws, brought about a 1,000 per cent increase in Chinatown's female population during the late 1940s. The Refugee Relief Acts, enacted in response to the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, opened the way for over 14,000 Chinese to settle in the United States, and many came to Boston.

The attitude of Post-World War II immigrants was dramatically different from those who had regarded their stay as temporary. "It wasn't until after World War II when the communists took over China and restricted travel," says Caroline Chang, "that the men finally realized they were going to have to stay in this country; they couldn't go back to China. Then people started turning to the idea of bringing their families over here." The Chinese at last started to put down roots in America.

The Chinese community became less economically autonomous and its population grew more diverse. The labor shortage caused by the war had opened the job market to Chinese men and women who worked at the Hingham and Boston Naval Shipyards, the South Boston Naval Yard Annex, and the Watertown Arsenal. The relaxed immigration laws paved the way for a permanent and growing Chinese community. Citizens bought homes and made long-term investments, and those who were eligible arranged to bring their families over. Chinese restaurants increased in

popularity and became extremely profitable businesses. (Significantly many establishments provided transportation for their employees, preserving the old communal standards). Since it was nearly impossible to return to the mainland after the Civil War, Boston's Chinese turned their attention to their own community. The increased female population fostered more family life, and the first large group of American-born Chinese followed. For the first time, social and economic advancement became important to Boston's Chinese. And when their children entered American schools, some of the more obvious barriers to interaction between the two cultures, such as language, began to fall away.

The generation of children that grew up at this time retained very close cultural ties with China. If raised in Chinatown, they very rarely associated with Caucasians.

As one resident remembers:

"There was a lot of discrimination. The Chinese were known as the 'yellow peril' that was coming into America. I remember going to kindergarten with my sister; we sat through a couple of days and couldn't understand a thing because we didn't have any English-speaking abilities. They sent us home and somebody found us roaming around the streets and took us back to our house, my father's place. Our parents asked why we didn't stay in school; we said, 'We didn't understand them and so they told us to go home.' So you can understand how far apart the various races were at that time."

The Chinese who went to college tended to major in

science or engineering, pursuing careers in fields where there was less discrimination than others and where fluency in English was not imperative. Parents discouraged their children from becoming doctors or teachers or from majoring in business, fearing that any infringement on the white world would arouse resentment.

The changes gave rise to some divisions in the community. The children of immigrants sometimes rejected their traditions, severely straining the bonds of family and community. Many of the recently naturalized Chinese-Americans hailed from provinces other than KuangTung and so they spoke different dialects. Ethnic divisions among Chinese-Americans were intensified by class divisions, especially after the revolution. Emigres and Mandarin (northern Chinese) students stranded here tended to separate themselves from the low-income, poorly educated Cantonese majority. The immigrants of the '50s and '60s were predominantly from Hong Kong and their cosmopolitan ways clashed with the rural values of the established community. "Hong Kong immigrants," declares one resident, "and the second or third generation Chinese are very far apart." Chinatown found itself deluged with cultural diversity.

Until recently, the Chinese community was essentially closed to outsiders. All matters were taken care of by relatives and friends. In order to save face, family and community organizations strove to resolve any problems their members encountered. In adhering to this principle they encouraged the stereotype of the self-sufficient Chinese.

The mid-1950s marked another major turning point for Boston's Chinese. Urban renewal and the construction of the Tufts-New England Medical Center shattered the status quo of the self-contained community. Chinatown could not remain silent against the encroachment by the outside world. In 1951, the Chinese Merchants Association building on Oxford

Street was opened for community use. However, within a decade almost half of the building was torn down to make way for the Southeast Expressway. This signalled the beginning of an urban renewal plan that would halve the land area of Chinatown.

Other institutions joined in the Chinatown land takings: the Boston Redevelopment Authority for the South Cove Urban Renewal Project, the Tufts-New England Medical Center for expansion of its health care and teaching facilities, and the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority for the turnpike extension. But, in 1962, when the public learned of the B.R.A.'s plans for the South Cove, plans that many saw benefitting Tufts only, the Chinese community and Mayor John Collins reached a "memorandum of understanding." The memorandum described Chinatown as the area from Essex Street to Kneeland Street, part of the Central Business District, and the area from Kneeland Street to Tai Tung Village. To protect the community from further land taking, the memorandum gave the community veto power over any "outside" developers.

As urban renewal progressed, Chinatown residents were forced to relocate, first to the borders of Chinatown, then to Castle Square and the South End.

As Richard Chin recalls:

"Before 1955 there were no Chinese families living south of Dover Street. But after the Mass. Pike extension came through and they knocked down our houses, the South End was the logical place to move. Chinese people couldn't move to the west or north because those areas were filled with the Combat Zone and the downtown stores."

Others moved to areas easily accessible by public transportation — Allston-Brighton, Brookline, Roxbury, and Dorchester. To the relocated Chinese, these were little more than bedroom communities and they continued to spend most of their working hours in Chinatown or in Chinese businesses.

Immigration to Greater Boston increased at the

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same time that people were forced to leave the center city. Traditional employment patterns continued and more Chinese restaurants opened in the suburbs. As the number of restaurants grew, the number of laundries declined with the advent of permanent-press materials.

One resident describes the situation:

"The laundries have almost disappeared. They used to be the principal business of the Chinese, and restaurants have dashed out now into the suburbs and on the highways. Back in the old days, the only place you could get Chinese food would be in Chinatown. But now the restaurants are the principal business and there are only a few shops in Chinatown—the suppliers and one or two souvenir shops. But other than that the Chinese still aren't engaged in anything else, except the second and third generation or perhaps the better-educated folk from China in the professions—engineering, medicine.

"But many of the old timers know no other trade except what they're presently engaged in. A few of them work in the sweat shops or needle trade as you might call them. There's no avenue for them. And that is one of the problems amongst the Chinese workers. The workers have no employment outside of the restaurants and restaurants can't take care of all of them. There's a saturation of restaurant workers at the present time."

Chinatown, despite recent changes, remains the center of social and cultural activities. "The Chinese in Boston," says Harry Dow, "all gravitate back into Chinatown. Whatever associations or groups or leaders that have a say in most of the Chinese activities are centered in Chinatown." Chinese from all over New England still come to buy the week's groceries, visit with friends and relatives, enjoy their customs and speak Chinese, see an opera or indulge in a bit of gambling, a major social activity for many older Chinese. The family associations hold frequent gath-

erings for their clans and sponsor wedding banquets and christenings. Chinatown also provides the only social activities for the many single men who live alone throughout Greater Boston. One major celebration in the Chinese community is the August Moon Festival. *Caroline Chang explains that celebration:*

"It's the second most important holiday in the Chinese calendar after New Year's. The festival was really in honor of the harvest and women. There's a lot of legends associated with the August Moon Festival—they have to do with lovers. There's one story about a couple who had been separated. The woman went to live in New England. Once a year the husband was allowed to go visit the woman. He delivered messages through the use of moon cakes. So there is a lot of tradition in the festival. There are historical legends, not just the more fairy tale legends. One says that during one of the times when China was at war the tribes used moon cakes to give over secrets to their counterparts by slipping pieces of paper inside them. According to the Chinese calendar it's supposed to be the 15th day of the 8th month. In Boston what we've done is we've linked up the festival with Summerthing so we actually celebrate it a little late."

Two Chinese language schools, print shops, two Chinese movie theaters, book stores, and a Chinese Center for the Arts also promote Chinese culture.

In the late 1950s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service acknowledged the existence of paper families. It allowed these illegal immigrants to "confess" and become naturalized citizens after residing here for five years. By 1963, the government had abolished the quota system. Chinese immigration peaked in the late 1960s and the number of Chinese entering the country increased fivefold in just two years. The Chinese population is currently increasing by 300 new residents each year and newcomers face some of the same problems that confronted immigrants 20 years ago.



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The language barrier is still the major obstacle that Chinese immigrants encounter. They continue to find jobs that do not require fluency in English and since there is no need or opportunity to learn English, they find themselves locked into the same menial positions. The language barrier has led to underemployment in the community, with doctors, physicists, mechanics, and teachers working in restaurants or other service occupations. These employment limitations only increase Chinatown's isolation.

There are new problems as well. Where family or community elders once handled all problems internal-

ly, today it is no longer possible. Since both parents often work, the close family ties that once characterized the Chinese way of life have weakened. Chinese parents and youths are experiencing a generation gap as young people search for an identity which will synthesize traditional Chinese values with modern American precepts. There are reports of increasing mental health problems and a rising juvenile delinquency rate. In 1972, one delinquency case was reported; one year later, there were 23.

Unemployment will certainly increase, given a saturated Chinese job market and a high city-wide

unemployment rate. In addition, the physical land area of Chinatown has decreased by half while its population has doubled, and there is no more available land to absorb an expanding population unless the community moves southward toward Castle Square and the South End. The other alternative is to build high rise structures, but that is not economically feasible for most Chinese.

But there is hope. Forward-looking community action groups are tackling Chinatown's problems. Programs in manpower training and English, a neighborhood employment center, a youth civic organization, elderly housing, and a new community school will all enhance the community and ease the acculturation of the Chinese in Boston.

Chinatown's residents and outside agencies are joining in this effort. In 1969 the Office of Human

Rights helped form a Community Grievance Task Force which, under the auspices of the C.C.B.A., helps identify the community's problems. Chinatown Little City Hall has provided another needed link between the community and the City.

Another community group, the Chinese-American Civic Association (CACA), has become increasingly community-action oriented, and works to get funding for many social service programs. In 1971, the CACA organized the only bilingual conference in North America, the Conference on the Future of Boston's Chinatown. It brought together people from the West Coast, New York, and Canada to discuss the problems of Chinese communities and devise possible solutions. Since the conference, a Golden Age Center has opened and plans are underway for construction of elderly housing and a nursing home. Pagoda Park, built on a

small piece of land between the expressway ramps, is a recent addition to the community's recreational facilities. The health clinic has been in operation for almost two years. The CACA multi-service center provides adult education classes and publishes *Sampan*, the community's only bilingual monthly newspaper. Tufts-New England Medical Center has a unique bilingual mental health team for children and young adults, and the community's youth are active in many other groups as well.

Last year, 1975, Chinatown celebrated its 100th anniversary. The community has come a long way from the "tent city," but only after enduring years of prejudice. Boston's Chinese community is still very small. The community recognizes its limited political impact and the younger generation is determined to change this situation.

In its second hundred years, Boston's Chinatown faces the challenge of acculturating to American society while striving to retain its own cultural identity and heritage. There are already many middle-class, second-generation Chinese-Americans who have made substantial contributions to American life by their participation in American institutions. That number can increase in the coming years. But the community has been crippled by its isolation and stereotypes, and the Chinese people have yet to receive their fair share. If future generations of Chinese-Americans have an easier time living in the mainstream of American society, their contributions toward that society can be much greater than in the past, and both cultures will benefit.

